

Tuesday, August 8, 1995

HAUNTED HOTEL

Ghosts in the bedrooms, phantoms in the dining rooms
and a 'chiller' in the basement that goes
wheeze in the night

Albo has
her own
spooky
story to tell.

THEY SAY the Fort Garry Hotel is haunted. They tell the ghost stories when new staff arrive at the majestic Gothic style hotel; or when they take visitors on guided tours of the 82-year-old castle-like structure's dusty crevices and dark catacombs, the corners where only employees are supposed to go.

We're getting into a service elevator, on our way to the roof, when our tour guides, managing partner Ida Albo and assistant manager Don Klassen, start with the stories.

Klassen goes first. He recalls a woman guest from North-western Ontario who was becoming a regular at the Fort Garry.

Klassen remembers her approaching him at the front desk on one of her visits. "She said, 'Can I have this room again?'"

Certainly, I said. It doesn't really have an outside view. I have a room with a view.

"And she said, 'No, I prefer this room. The spirits visit me there.'"

"Spirits? I said.

"Yes," she said. "There's a lady in a ball gown who hovers at the foot of my bed, and after that she moves out the window."

A ball gown?

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In the Free Press library, another corner normally reserved for employees only, there is a spool of microfiche marked December 1913. According to the newspaper of the day, a high society ball, sponsored by the Victorian Order of Nurses, was held to open the Fort Garry Hotel on Dec. 10, 1913. The gushing story, that dropped names and dripped detail, appeared on page 9 of the following day's paper. It included this paragraph:

It would take hours to describe every lovely gown, made so much lovelier against the handsome backdrop of the gorgeous rooms and hangings, but a few noticed were these:

The reporter then went on to list 80 women and describe in details each of their gowns. The list was so long, in fact, that it had to be "turned" to page 20.

Among the "few" so mentioned, was one "Lady McMillan," who was attired in a white lace and brocade gown.

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"Be very careful up there," the man



Gordon Sinclair Jr.

from Otis Elevator says.

We are standing on a deck in a bright roof-top room that houses the gears and mechanisms of the old elevator system, and the Otis Elevator man is worried that a piece of clothing or a piece of us might get caught if the machinery suddenly starts.

"All of this is replaced by one computer chip," Klassen says.

There are dates and names scratched into the weathered copper sheathing up on the roof. "Oct. 3, 1958," reads one.

There are three satellite dishes, too, right next to a room on the roof where a printing press still sits. The hotel used to print menus for CN Rail dining cars.

Trains, and later planes, used to bring prime ministers and princes and other rich and/or famous guests.

Sir Laurence Olivier slept here. So did Nat King Cole, Joan Crawford, Louis Armstrong, Charles Boyer, Arthur Fiedler, Basil Rathbone, Charles Laughton, Nelson Eddy, Field Marshall Montgomery - and Field Marshall Montgomery's double.

All dead now.

We're still up on the roof when Ida Albo recounts her own spooky story.

She and her husband Rick Bel live in the hotel. One night they got into an argument and Ida went to bed without him. She was sleeping, face down, when she was woken by Rick entering the room. She didn't bother turning over. She didn't want to get into it again. Then she felt him sit down on the bed beside her.

Finally, she turned over to talk. But Rick wasn't there.

No one was there.

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There are other things, beside spirits, that haunt the hotel. Last December, Ida Albo says, her Quebec-based co-owners spent \$35,000 on heating. That's because the former owners transformed the hotel from steam to electric heat. The new owners are switching to natural gas.

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There is a spiral stairway from the roof to the basement, but we take the elevator. We exit the huge, clean and bright kitchen where banquet meals are prepared and bread is baked.

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But below, in the catacomb-like halls that once bustled with plumbers and electricians and chambermaids, the basement is a ghost town of empty lockers and abandoned rooms.

One of the abandoned rooms might be coming back to life, though. The hotel is thinking about going back to doing its own laundry. It costs them \$70,000 a year to contract out.



Gershman behind sub-basement bars.

Then there's the Crystal Casino, which the owners have been trying to evict because the hotel could be making more money through catering than it recovers in rent from the European style gaming operation.

The Crystal Casino moved in six years ago.

That reminded Klassen of another story.

"This was fall of 89," Klassen said. He was working the graveyard shift, doing the audit, when one of the night workers came looking for him.

"He was very frightened," Klassen said. "The word he used was freaked out."

Klassen said the night worker and another employee had been doing dishes in the main kitchen.

They went into the back stairway of what was then the Factor's Table and as he was reaching the top of the stairs he could hear the sounds of a dining room. Seeing as it was four in the morning this was very unusual. He walked out the swinging door from the kitchen to the main dining room and he sees a man sitting at a table, cutlery in hand, eating.

The man didn't look up. He didn't acknowledge his presence at all.

That's when the night dishwasher ran for Klassen. When he and Klassen arrived to investigate, the man was gone. Klassen checked the door to the dining room. It was locked from the inside.

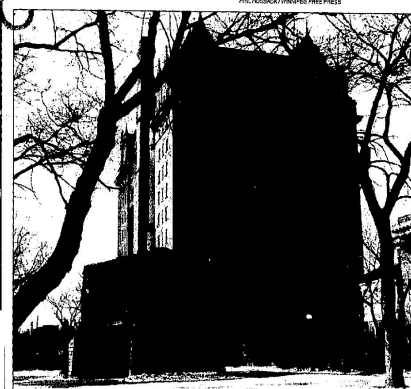
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Somewhere in the sub-basement, no one seems to know where, there's an entrance to a tunnel that once connected the hotel with the steam plant at The Forks.

There are a lot of unexplained things in the sub basement.

There's a hole in the wall from which an eerie sound emanates.

H-a-a-a-a-h! H-a-a-a-a-h!

It sounds like the labored breath of an old lady.

Klassen says the sound comes from an air conditioning apparatus.

"It's called the chiller," Klassen says. Then he pauses and chuckles.

"Which is maybe an appropriate name."

The Hollywood producers loved this room," Ida says, a reference to another tour she spirited through the hotel.

"We often joke there's got to be someone buried here somewhere."

There are other ghost stories they tell late at night at the Fort Garry, when the staff relaxes around a table. There's the one about the chef who died, the light

that moves up and down the hallways and, of course, more accounts of clattering dishes coming from the empty dining room.

There is one ghost story, though, that Ida Albo doesn't like to talk about. It's the one about the man found dead in a room and the blood stain that...

Well, we'll leave that one to your imagination.

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Back in the Free Press library one of the librarians is fascinated by talk of the haunted hotel. The woman in the white gown, the sound of people eating in the empty dining room, and the story that the hotel doesn't like to talk about.

"Joan Crawford," the librarian repeated. "She's one I would like to have met."

Then the Free Press librarian smiled. "And maybe I still can."



Klassen sits at the ghost's place in the bedroom.

